A Content Analysis of Pre-Service School Counselors' Evaluations of an Urban

Practicum Experience

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Abstract

This article examines the evaluations of nine pre-service school counselors who completed a practicum in an inner-city or urban, predominately African American school. A content analysis of the pre-service counselors' narrative evaluations was studied and six themes emerged: (a) Relationships and Interactions with Urban Students and Educators, (b) Cultural Differences, (c) Urban Schools and Environment, (d) Urban School Counseling Skills, (e) Urban School Counselor's Role, and (f) Urban Student Issues/Problems. Implications for urban school counselor educators and future research are given.

A Content Analysis of Pre-Service School Counselors' Evaluations of an Urban

Practicum Experience

What is it like for a pre-service school counselor to complete a practicum in an urban or inner-city school? This simple yet searching question lies at the heart of this research study. The authors sought to learn more about how White/European American school counseling practicum students come to understand their experiences in an inner-city, predominately African American school district. Understanding an environment and community, which is in direct contrast with one's own immediate environment, can be a difficult and anxiety-provoking experience (Reed, 1998). For this reason, monitoring pre-service school counselors who are ethnically, culturally, and economically dissimilar to their clients is essential and a necessary component of a school counselor training program, specializing in urban school settings.

In his 1991 book, *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol described life and schools in inner cities. He described these cities as comprised of impoverished people who live in public housing, many of them undereducated minorities. Inner-city schools are often overcrowded and suffer from underfunding, poor resources, low achievement levels, uncertified teachers, and continual threats of violence (Hunter & Donahoo, 2003; Jacobs, 1993). For many decades, much of what has been written about urban counselors has been critical, asserting that they are substantive factors in the continuing failure of education in urban schools (e.g., DeLany, 1991; Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum, 1976; Walpole et al., 2005). At the same time, the conditions in many urban schools create an environment that is difficult for young, competent beginning counselors to voluntarily work in. Helping students whose lives and cultures are vastly

different from their own, is a difficult and often frustrating experience for pre-service

school counselors (Holcomb-McCoy, 1998). Most pre-service school counselors'

notions about counseling largely come from their own school experiences and many

want to counsel in environments where they have some level of familiarity and a mental

map to rely on when working with students (Herring, 1997). Thus, placing pre-service

counselors from suburban or rural backgrounds in inner-city or urban schools can be

challenging and warrants counselor educators' concern.

Comer and Maholmes (1999) assert that it is difficult to find graduate students

who are willing to go beyond coursework and invest their time, talent, and enthusiasm in

urban schools. In particular, students who have not themselves had an urban

educational experience are least likely to volunteer for an assignment in urban schools.

Students who are assigned field placements in urban schools often lack knowledge of

the urban landscape and hold many assumptions and beliefs about urban education.

They are also more likely to cite safety and lack of resources as major deterrents

(Schwartz, 1996). Wolffe (1996) even suggested that student teachers' reluctance to

work in urban schools seems to be due, in part, to the negative perceptions they hold

regarding urban schools and students. His work revealed that the media has been the

primary teacher of what these students seem to 'know' about urban schools and, as a

result, students are making career decisions based on this knowledge. Based on the

previous literature, it seems only fitting that school counselor education programs

provide more opportunities for students to have meaningful experiences in urban

schools and with urban educators prior to and during their field experiences. Until such

opportunities are provided most students will maintain the notions they have about

these schools and choose other schools in which to complete internships and eventually to work.

The lack of adequate preparation for counselors in urban schools is a problem affecting many urban school systems (Lee, 2005). While a significant core of urban school counselors have received training within formal institutions of counselor education, very few have completed programs that focus specifically on urban issues and populations. While it may be tenuous to assert any direct and/or intentional link between counselor education and the struggles of urban education, it seems clear that counselor education programs can have a positive impact on urban school reform and initiatives, if there was more "specialized" training of counselors seeking jobs in urban settings.

With that said, this study's primary goal was to explore an important component to any school counselor education program—the practicum experience. Since there is no research on the experiences and/or challenges of pre-service school counselors completing practica in urban school settings, the present study was designed to pursue the following research question: How do pre-service school counselors describe their first practicum experience in an urban school? The authors chose qualitative methods of inquiry as the most appropriate vehicle for seeking answers to the probing question about the urban school counseling practicum experience.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from nine ($n = 9$) pre-service counselors who spent a semester in inner-city, predominately African American and/or Hispanic/Latino American

schools. Two of the nine participants were male and all of the participants were White or European-American. All of the participants were in the process of completing their master's degree in school counseling and were completing a 100-hour practicum in schools located in and surrounding a large northeastern city.

The participants in this study were all students in a Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP)-accredited school counselor education program specializing in urban schools and urban education. The program's curricula includes modified courses that cover concepts and theories that are relevant to persons and students enrolled and/or working in urban schools. The program faculty attempt to cultivate students' interest in urban education and at the same time provide positive experiences and observations of effective school counseling practices in urban schools. These positive experiences include a structured urban practicum experience early in the training curriculum so that students are likely to work in a similar site during their internship. Practicum students have numerous opportunities to work together on group projects in their urban school placements, to visit a diverse group of urban schools (e.g., charter schools, alternative schools), to observe a specific reform strategy in action at an urban school, and to participate in supervision with a doctoral student specializing in urban school counselor education.

Procedures and Data Collection

Graduate school counseling students at a large university in the northeastern region of the U.S. were introduced to the goals, objectives, logistics (e.g., confidentiality), and rationale for this study in their spring semester practicum course. The students were then given the option of participating in the study. They were also

informed that the findings would be presented in a narrative manner so that no

individual would be identified. After obtaining informed consent from all of the students

(n = 9), they were given an evaluation with the following questions:

1. What was the most difficult aspect of working at your practicum site?

2. What did you enjoy the most about working at your practicum site?

3. What did you learn about yourself as a result of working at your practicum site?

4. Would you consider working in an urban school like your site? Why or why not?

5. What did you learn about counseling in an urban school, as a result of your

    practicum experience?

Participants were instructed to take as much time as needed to write their responses to

the questions. Additionally, they were told that spelling and grammar were not

important. Instead, they were encouraged to express themselves in their own words and

to write as much or as little as they wanted.

Having participants provide a written narrative in response to open-ended

questions about their experiences in an urban school was based on both theoretical and

practical considerations. Theoretically, it is the product (i.e., what participants gained

and learned from their practicum experience) rather than the process (i.e., how

participants came to experience their practicum) that was the focus of our study.

Therefore, a reflectively written essay was an appropriate means to gather this

information. Also, written narratives constitute the most efficient means of tapping

meaning structure in the time available without an in-depth interview. This method was

very similar to that used by other researchers (e.g., Frantz, Farrell, & Trolley, 2001) who

used qualitative investigations to explore participants' unique experiences related to a specific event.

Data Coding

Participants' narratives were coded and analyzed using procedures designed to make valid inferences from open-ended questions in survey research (Weber, 1985). The analysis was based on the assumption that the structure of meaning participants assigned to their practicum experiences was inherent in their written narratives. The role of the researcher is to identify, describe, and classify embedded meanings through a content analysis of these textual data. Our primary consideration in coding was to represent authentically the "voices" of the participants as we heard them in the narratives. Narratives were read and coded "blindly" without knowledge of any other data collected on the individuals.

First, data were broken down into units of discrete thoughts or sentiments and classified under a content category. The researchers read each of the essays and came to a joint determination (i.e., consensus) regarding the meaning element contained in each unit. Wherever possible, participants' own words were used to label the categories. Additional categories were generated according to a process of constant comparison between participants' narrative descriptions of their practicum experiences and those categories already identified. In other words, each datum was compared with all others to assign its content category or identify a new category. No limits were imposed on the number of categories to be discovered and there were more than 10 by the completion of this initial coding process.

In the second step, the 10 initial categories were reviewed systematically with the purpose of organizing them along hierarchical lines. In other words, some categories were conceptualized as corollaries or derivatives of broader or more omnibus categories. These broader categories were cross-checked against each other to minimize overlap and to ensure the uniqueness of each. Again, this was accomplished through consensus-building collaborative discussion among the authors.

Next, the basic properties of each category were defined and made explicit. Each discrete response was re-read and reduced to a single descriptive phrase or sentence that embodied the essence of the idea or sentiment being expressed. From these sets of descriptors, the operational definition of the category was drafted using the participants' actual words, or close proximity to their words, to ensure authenticity to the participants' experiences. These definitions were drafted by the authors and reviewed by another counselor educator as a final "check" on the authenticity and plausibility of the categories.

Results

The six major themes that emerged from this content analysis were (a) *Relationships and Interactions With Urban Students and Educators*, (b) *Cultural Differences*, (c) *Urban Schools and Environment*, (d) *Urban School Counseling Skills*, (e) *Urban School Counselor's Role*, and (f)) *Urban Student Issues/Problems*. All of participants ($n = 9$) in the sample wrote of more than one of these major themes in their narratives. For the sample as a whole, typically each participant mentioned two or three categories. It could be said that the norm was for individual participants to use multiple themes in describing their practicum experiences in urban schools.

In the following sections, each of the six major themes will be operationally defined and then elaborated on using raw data provided by participants to illustrate the nuances of meaning they expressed.

Relationships and Interactions with Urban Students and Educators

The largest number of statements (*n* = 32) noted throughout the narratives described the trainees' relationships with urban students and educators. This theme emerged as the dominant category in our data set with 100% of the participants reporting such content. Fundamentally, the relationships with the administrators, teachers, counselors, and students were described as being important to their overall experiences in the urban schools. The relationships described seemed to occur at positive and negative levels. For instance, many of the practicum students described how they had difficulty developing relationships with school personnel, while others described their positive relationships with school personnel. Also, many described their concern regarding negative relationships between students and educators. Their observations of others' relationships seemed to have a significant influence on their perceptions of urban schools and how urban schools function. Examples of responses included:

- "Working with a site supervisor who I struggled to respect through observing her interactions with students…I found her to be very negative and condescending. We had trouble communicating and I ended up working mainly independently."

- "I enjoyed working directly with students. It reminded me of why I wanted to work in an urban school district."

- "It was challenging connecting with students who are very different from me."

- "I did not think that I would be able to build a strong rapport with the students. However, now that I'm leaving I realize I did connect with these kids."

- I enjoyed one on one time with children, meeting parents, and getting to share the experience with my practicum partner."

- "The school staff was so kind during the time that I was there. They were very helpful and accommodating."

- "I enjoyed the students the most. I really loved getting to know them and hearing their stories."

- "Despite the challenges of working with many of the students, I thoroughly enjoyed working with them."

Cultural Differences

This category described participants who noted the fact that they were culturally different from the students and/or educators at their practicum site. Sixteen (*n* = 16) of the participants' responses discussed cultural and personal differences between themselves and others at their site.

Many of the participants noted their "Whiteness" and the discomfort that they (and others) felt because of their minority status in the school. Clearly, overcoming and coping with ethnic and cultural differences impacted the participants' perceptions of their practicum experiences.

- "I learned that while many of my life experiences differ from the students I worked with, I still had a great deal to offer as a counselor."

- "One teacher assumed (perhaps on the basis of race or age) that I had never experienced a setting like my practicum site and therefore treated me as though I

could not possibly understand. Even this interaction improved though once I established more of a relationship."

- "In the beginning, I believe I was viewed with a certain level of suspicion and mistrust---and understandably so—by the staff at my site. Being a young White woman in a 100% African American school definitely made me stand out and caused them to adopt the stance, "How can she truly understand what our students and staff are experiencing?"

- "Trying to relate to students with very different cultural backgrounds was difficult."

- "Initially working at a majority African American school was a culture shock for me. I had not grown up in this type of environment."

- "I think because I was a minority in the school I stood out more as an "outsider" at the beginning of the experience and because I was one of the few white people that the students knew. It took me a little more time to earn their trust and respect."

Urban Schools and Environment

In this category, participants focused on the urban school structure and its immediate environment. Seven of the participants' responses (*n* = 7) described their school's structure and/or environment. The school's administrative structure, leadership, and community seemed to influence the participants' perceptions of their urban practicum experience. Responses in this category included:

- "The hardest part was knowing what authority you had within the school (in terms of how to deal with kids in the office who were in trouble, where to send kids who were misbehaving, where and when children could go to the bathroom."

- "The most significant lesson I learned while working in an urban school is that for most children the teaching conducted at home by parents and other adults is in many cases held above the lessons in school.

- "I learned that parents teach their children in many ways to survive urban environments."

- "I really like the idea of providing access to the students. I did, however, feel unsafe at times."

- "The administrators and teachers seem to be inconsistent in their discipline of teaching practices, thus making for a challenging environment to work in."

- "I became more sensitive to the external factors that may impact upon the urban students' academic achievement."

- "The staff works very hard to provide a pleasant, safe learning environment for the students and I felt very comfortable in this environment."

Urban School Counseling Skills

This category described participants who responded in relation to their skills to work with students, teachers, administrators, and other counselors. Five ($n = 5$) participant responses focused on the pre-service counselor's skill level or ability to work with students and/or school personnel. Many of the responses reflected the counselor's desire to acquire more strategies and techniques for working with urban students.

- "I learned that I need to work on behavior management techniques. I haven't been the most assertive or outspoken person in my lifetime and it was difficult to deal with the children's teasing, fighting, outbursts, and crying."

- "I learned that I have so much more to learn."

- "I learned that I have little patience for poor teaching skills. I learned that I can empathize very well with the students and really enjoy working with them."

- "I learned that I actually do have the skills within me to be a school counselor in an urban school."

- "I worked with three students on academic issues throughout this semester. One of the most challenging aspects of this experience was empowering the students to follow through with what the students said they would do."

- "I would like to improve my challenging skills."

Urban School Counselor's Role

This category describes the participants' observations of the role of school counselors in urban schools. Many of the pre-service counselors discussed the unclear or flexible role of counselors in urban schools. Only a small portion of the responses (*n* = 4) reflected this category. Because the participants' site supervisors assumed various roles and functions in the schools, the pre-service counselors observed conflicting perceptions of what school counselors do and do not do. Also, some of the participants noted that school counselors have an important role in urban schools and their desire to work in urban schools was confirmed.

- "I learned that I may have to wear many hats; for instance my site supervisor works as the nurse 2 days a week. I also realize that I will have limited resources."

- "There's so much potential for the role of the school counselor to positively impact students' lives at the middle school level."

- "I can imagine struggling with the lack of support within a school counseling department like that at my site. I also believe that that is all the more reason to work in a school like that to build the support and help the school improve."

- "I learned that the need for good counselors is real and immediate---the reality of this was reinforced by my experience. I also learned that there is a need for counselors to balance providing what the student needs with empowering the student rather than fostering a dependency…I learned this is a fine line."

Urban Students' Issues and Problems

For some pre-service counselors (*n* = 3), the issues and problems of their students/clients were notable. For these participants, the urban students' problems were noted as sometimes overwhelming and many students had multi-problems. This theme is closely related to "Urban School Counseling Skills" theme because many of the pre-service counselors talked of how they needed the necessary skills to work with students' problems. These statements included the following:

- "The most difficult aspect for me was hearing all of the issues that students were dealing with outside of school. I met so many students with great resilience who were leaving school and returning home to empty houses, parents using drugs, or families that were victims of homicides."

- "Truly the most difficult thing for me was hearing some of the students' stories and feeling inept in my counseling skills."

- "I can't fathom some of the things these kids have seen. I wish I knew how to help them work through their problems effectively."

Discussion

In the authors' attempt to better understand how school counseling trainees conceptualize and process their first urban school counseling field experience, the most striking finding to emerge from this content analysis was the fact that the participants had multiple ways of describing their first inner-city field experience. Our analysis yielded six distinct themes, each with its own defining set of characteristics. This suggested that for pre-service school counselors, the first urban practicum experience is complex with a host of different dimensions that cannot be reduced easily to a single theme or outcome. Stated differently, pre-service urban school counselors and their counseling supervisors must consider multiple factors during field experiences. At the level of the individual participant, the fact that the majority of our participants noted two or more major themes in their essays seemed to verify this conclusion that understanding came to most through a multiplicity of dimensions.

Among the themes discovered in our sample, the most pervasive theme found was *Relationships and Interactions with Urban Students and Educators*. It can be said that, first and foremost, relationships between the pre-service school counselors and others in the school was of utmost importance to the counselors' perceptions of their experiences. Awareness of relationships with others appeared to dominate the counselors' conscious evaluation of their practicum experiences. Nevertheless, it was difficult to assign either a negative or positive polarity to this theme. For some participants, their relationships were negative and for others, their relationships were positive and/or nurturing. Although this is not uncommon for pre-service counselors, it

was interesting that "relationships" were discussed more than any other dimension (e.g., skills).

The second most pervasive theme, *Cultural Differences*, reflected the cross-cultural and/or cross-ethnic experiences of the participants. This theme seemed to stem from the counselors' "minority" status at their schools. Many of the counselors also talked of being "White" and the meaning of "Whiteness" in an all-African American setting. For most of the pre-service counselors, the experience of being the "only" White person in a school setting was foreign. Through supervision, many of the counselors worked with their supervisors on topics related to being the "other." Additionally, the counselors discussed their discomfort with being perceived as "distrustful" or "lacking competence" in working with African American students in urban schools. Reading the participants' written comments conveyed clearly a tone of relief that the cultural differences did not become a lasting issue but was an issue that had to be dealt with. It was interesting that many of the participants spoke of how the cultural differences seemed to be more of a "non-issue" at the end of their experience. In essence, it seems that building cross-cultural relationships is an important skill for urban pre-service counselors.

It was interesting to compare our findings to the urban school counseling literature. Although the existing literature in this area does not address the specific experiences of practicum students in urban field placements, there are similar themes. For instance, Lee's (2005) discussion of the climate and diversity of urban schools was reminiscent of what the practicum students described in the "*Urban Schools and Environment*," and "*Cultural Differences*" conveyed in our sample. Green, Conley, and

Barnett (2005), in their discussion of urban school counselor models, emphasized the

need for an ecological perspective in order to address the complex environments in

which urban youth live. This is also similar to what we termed "*Urban Schools and*

Environment." The "*Relationships with Urban Students and Educators*" theme has some

direct parallels with what Day-Vines and Day-Hairston (2005) refer to as counselors

overcoming their own inhibitions. They discuss the importance of counselors

demonstrating comfort and willingness to develop relationships with urban youth. In this

study, the participants wrote of their ability or inability to develop comfortable and

productive relationships with individuals in their setting.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Study</div>

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service school counselors'

practicum experiences in urban schools. One limitation of this study was the small

sample size. Although this study contributes to the overarching goal of articulating some

type of model for preparing urban pre-service counselors, it is unclear whether the

results are applicable to other urban pre-service counselors at other institutions. In

addition, the fact the pre-service counselors in this sample all selected to attend a

school counselor education program that is focused on urban school counseling.

Therefore, they many have been more attuned and "prepared" to enter urban field

placements. Stylistic differences of the pre-service counselors were a limitation of using

a methodological approach that relies on detailed narratives to provide information.

Some of the pre-service counselors simply were more willing to write more expansively

than their peers, resulting in inaccurate or incomplete information about some

participants because they did not provide as much narrative detail.

Implications

Perhaps some of the current concerns about what is the "best" way to train urban school counselors can be addressed by these data. The findings of this study represent what a small group of pre-service counselors gleaned from their field experience in inner city, predominately African American schools. These findings lead to some considerations for urban school counselor education. First, it is important that urban school counselor educators note the multiplicity of dimensions that are involved in pre-service counselors urban field placements. Urban school counselor educators, therefore, must attempt to address the themes that evolved from this study and possibly future research will reveal other possible themes. It seems, from the findings of this study, that the relationships or interactions between pre-service school counselors and urban students and educators are significant and seem to influence pre-service school counselors' views of their work in urban schools. For many of the participants, the development of productive and trusting relationships with school personnel was difficult. This finding raises numerous perplexing questions for counselor educators: How can counselor educators enhance the relationship-building and cross-cultural skills of trainees before the first urban field experience? How effective were the trainees in helping students? And, would negative relationships with others' in the urban school setting ultimately lead to less effective counseling outcomes? It is possible therefore that when training school counselors, emphasis should be placed on the six themes delineated here.

The data also indicate that understanding urban communities and school structures is important to pre-service school counselors. As noted by Lee (2005) and

Holcomb-McCoy (1998), issues and problems germane to urban educators are not given sufficient and accurate coverage in school counselor preparation programs. Therefore, coursework in urban school counselor education programs should include topics such as promoting equity among students, cross-cultural relationship building, increasing parent engagement, and urban education reform. Coursework and familiarity with concepts related to urban schools and issues will undoubtedly help pre-service counselors better understand the urban landscape. Also, inviting "master" urban school counselors to co-teach classes, conduct action research and to be a full partner in the counselor preparation process as opposed to just providing field experiences is needed. This will not only lend credibility to urban school counseling at the higher education level but will professionalize urban school counseling as well.

While the practicum and internship field experiences provide urban pre-service counselors with valuable experiences, there is still a need for urban pre-service counselors to develop specific skills around areas that are critical to their success as counselors in urban schools. Pre-service counselors need to have "how-to" clinics that help them learn to manage the demands that often overwhelm them, particularly in the first year of counseling. These clinics should be led in conjunction with other disciplines to establish common language for working and to mirror the experiences pre-service counselors will have in urban schools. Some examples of these clinics could include:

- How to involve parents in the educational process;
- How to work with other support personnel to make appropriate referrals for students with special needs;
- How to work with diversity in terms of language, culture, learning styles, etc.;

- How to align the school counseling program with curriculum expectations;

- How to challenge unjust and/or inequitable practices in schools;

- How to manage crisis in the school; and

- How to effectively advocate for students and their parents.

Because our ultimate goal was the examination of the urban school counseling field placement, the focus on the perceived experiences of practicum students was only an initial step in that direction. In this step, we immersed ourselves in the subjective narratives of the participants to ensure that the qualitative content analysis proceeded independently of other quantitative data analyses. Identification of the six themes has answered some questions and raised many others. For instance, "Which theme is most related to whether or not a pre-service counselor accepts a position at an urban school? Do certain combinations of themes have implications for successful urban school counseling practice? How do pre-service counselors best overcome obstacles at their urban school placements? How can supervisors best assist supervisees overcome obstacles at their urban school placement? Future research should attempt to answer such questions by integrating qualitative findings with quantitative measures. Such an exploration would be based on "methodological pluralism" which uses both narratives and numbers and respects the distinctive forms of understanding that each can promote (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2000).

And finally, the results of this study have many implications for practicing urban school counselors. With the increasing challenges of urban schools (e.g., families in poverty, high concentration of immigrant students), it is imperative that practicing urban school counselors receive the knowledge and skill they need in order to do their jobs

effectively. Many school counselors in urban settings may be unprepared to enter schools that are vastly different from school that they attended and as a result, need critical professional development related to urban education and counseling of students from culturally and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds. Supervisors of school counselors in urban settings can use the six themes that emerged in this study to guide their professional development activities. For instance, professional development might include topics such as evidence-based counseling practices with culturally diverse students, managing an urban school counseling program, urban community-based resources, and successful urban educational practices.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

School counseling in urban settings can oftentimes be quite different from school counseling in other settings (e.g., rural, suburban). Most of the differences stem from the large size of urban school districts, the diversity of the urban students, the lack of resources needed to educate students, the apathy of many urban residents towards urban schools, the disconnection between school personnel and urban students, and the lack of adequate preparation of urban teachers and personnel (Kozol, 1991; Warren, 2005). All of these critical issues create an environment that is oftentimes challenging for beginning school counselors. This study sought to examine the themes that emerged from practicum students' evaluations of their first urban school practicum. The authors hope that the findings will assist urban school counselor educators better understand how to enhance, nurture, and assist pre-service counselors be successful in urban schools.

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